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SUBJECT Vitaly Yurchenko

LAURIE WACHENSMIDT: Vitaly Yurchenko, the former KGB agent who, after defecting to the U.S., now wants to return to the Soviet Union is being interviewed today by U.S. officials.

The State Department wants to make sure Yurchenko isn't being coerced into returning to his homeland after three months in the hands of the U.S. intelligence agents.

NPR's Catherine Ferguson reports from the State Department.

CATHERINE FERGUSON: The Acting Secretary of State for European Affairs will head the team of U.S. officials who will interview Yurchenko. A medical doctor will be present to help insure that Yurchenko is making a decision to leave this country of his own free will.

The State Department has vehemently denied Yurchenko's allegations that he was drugged and brought to the U.S. against his will. Now, officials here want to satisfy themselves that Yurchenko has decided to return to the Soviet Union, quote, "free of Soviet coercion."

The State Department's Charles Redman.

CHARLES REDMAN: It appears it was a personal decision, and we will attempt to confirm that at a meeting with him.

FERGUSON: According to the State Department, Yurchenko is here under the Parole Authority of the Attorney General and does not hold a diplomatic passport. But, the State Department's Redman said that had the former Soviet agent told U.S. officials he wanted to go home, he certainly would have been allowed to do so.

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I'm Catherine Ferguson, at the State Department.

SUSAN STAMBERG: Washington, D.C. was simply buzzing today over the case of Vitaly Yurchenko. The high ranking official of the Soviet intelligence service told a news conference last night that he was not the defector U.S. authorities claimed him to be, but instead had been kidnapped, drugged and held by the CIA.

U.S. officials flatly denied Yurchenko, but they said he would be allowed to leave this country if he satisfies them that he really wants to go.

Yurchenko was scheduled for a visit to the State Department late today for just such a talk.

When Yurchenko decided to redefect, he simply got up from a dinner table and walked away from his CIA case officer.

We have two reports on the Yurchenko defection, first from NPR's Jim Engel who returned today to the restaurant where Yurchenko began his trip home.

JIM ENGEL: Last Saturday night, Vitaly Yurchenko came here to a small restaurant in the Georgetown section of Washington, an inexpensive French bistro called Au Pied DeCochon. It was busy then, and the streets were packed with those who were enjoying the revelry of a Halloween weekend in the city's busiest restaurant and nightclub district, a perfect place away from his guard and lose himself in the crowd.

An Administration source tells NPR today that Yurchenko was here with only one other person that night, a CIA companion. He was usually guarded by two men, sources said, but in the last two week Yurchenko had been complaining about always being accompanied by security people and the lack of privacy. He needed more time to himself, he told the CIA. As a result, Yurchenko had two opportunities Saturday to make phone calls unobserved. During one of those opportunities, Administrative sources believe he contacted Soviet officials and made arrangements to go back over to the Soviet side.

The restaurant is only a half-mile from the Soviet Embassy compound where Yurchenko held his news conference yesterday. Sources said he made his way there after slipping away from his CIA companion.

Yurchenko admits he left CIA custody on Saturday, but he claims he made an escape from a CIA safe house in Virginia. He spoke yesterday through an interpreter.

VITALY YURCHENKO: Only on November the 2nd, due to a momentary lapse of attention on the part of the persons watching me, I was able to break out to freedom and come to the Soviet Embassy.

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ENGEL: There are still a lot of questions, but the one that really bothers Administration officials is whether Yurchenko was a legitimate defector who got homesick or a setup to embarrass the United States on the eve of the Reagan-Gorbachev summit.

There are two schools of thought on that. The group that believes he was a legitimate defector say the information Yurchenko provided to Amercian intelligence officials was verified and corroborated, that he'd passed lie detector tests, and that what he told the U.S. did a great deal of damage to the Soviet intelligence network. Those who believed he was a legitimate defector also explained his sudden turn-around in personal terms.

Sources have told NPR that one of Yurchenko's motivations for defecting was a love interest. While assigned to Washington in the late 1970s, Yurchenko started an affair with the wife of another Soviet diplomat. Yurchenko was transferred back to Moscow in 1980, and the other Soviet diplomat and his wife were eventually transferred to Canada.

Nevertheless, the affair between Yurchenko and the woman continued in Moscow where she came two or three times a year for extensive home leave. As an Administration source put it, the flame has been kept alive.

In August, shortly after Yurchenko's arrival in the U.S., the CIA allowed him to contact the woman and a meeting was arranged. The CIA then accompanied him to Canada to see her, but during an evening together the woman told Yurchenko that the romance wasn't going to work out and that it was over. That was the beginning of what one Administration source called today "a mental deterioration for Yurchenko." He left his family in the Soviet Union to start a new life and a new marriage, said the source. When she rejected him, the new future he had anticipated started to collapse. That along with the usual trauma of defecting and inevitable homesickness began to wear on Yurchenko, sources say. He started suffering from what one source described as the post-pardon blues.

He became more depressed and started drinking more and apparently made the decision to try to go back to the Soviet Union.

This was the interpretation of Yurchenko's action that the Administration appeared to embrace. In its on-the-record remarks today, State Department spokesman Charles Redman....

CHARLES REDMAN: I have no comments concerning Mr. Yurchenko's motivations other than to say that it appears that it was a personal decision by Yurchenko and that we will attempt to confirm this at a meeting with him.

ENGEL: The other school of thought, however, is equally convinced that Yurchenko was a setup from the very beginning. This group also cites the intelligence information he shared with the U.S. officials. They say

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the information he gave was good, but that most of it was historical. That is that it affected what are called intelligence assets, such as intelligence agents, who have already outlived their usefulness.

Sources said Yurchenko also gave the U.S. some new details about the Soviet use of chemical warfare in Cambodia and Afghanistan, but the U.S. already suspected what he confirmed.

Sources said he also identified other people who were collaborating with the Soviet Union, but none were now in sensitive positions.

Although there are two points of view on Yurchenko's original motivations for defecting, both groups agree on two things: one, that the information Yurchenko gave them was legitimate and helpful; second, officials agree the Soviets used the Yurchenko turn-around for the maximum propaganda advantage.

The United States has dismissed Yurchenko's claims that he was kidnapped and drugged as unfounded. One Administration source said he understood that Yurchenko had to say things to rehabilitate himself because he's going back to the Soviet Union, but they made the story much bigger than they had to, said the official, and that shows they're not concerned about poisoning the atmosphere before the summit.

But, government spokesmen asked about that today refused to issue any public criticism of the Soviet actions in the matter.

I'm Jim Engel, in Washington.

ALAN BURLOW: I'm Alan Burlow.

Senator Patrick Leahy, the senior Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee says the Yurchenko case has the potential to seriously embarrass the Unite States and to undermine U.S. intelligence capabilities.

Leahy believes Yurchenko not, as the State Department says, a real defector.

SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY: Anybody who's as knowledgeable about the KGB as he is wouldn't be going back at all unless he was here as a double agent or as a plant in the first place. What if it turns out that the KGB was able to put a double agent in our midst, have the CIA vouch for him, take significant actions based on what he said and then say to him, ok, come on back home now. You've done a great job. That's one heck of an embarrassment to the United States, and it's also going to make those intelligence agents who have to work around the world say, "Ooops!"

BURLOW: Leahy was briefed by U.S. intelligence officials this afternoon. He says he expects the briefings to continue for some time,

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because he and many other Senators are angry about the Yurchenko redefection. Leahy said that many Senators raised questions about the legitimacy of Yurchenko's defection but received repeated assurances that the top Soviet spy was legitimate, that agency screening methods, which includes the use of lie detector tests, were adequate.

Leahy said the screening system broke down.

SENATOR LEAHY: It's a proven failure, at least in some point. How great was that failure? Was the failure great enough to allow a double agent to get through? If it was, then was more than a serious embarrassment. This is a very, very critical matter because it brings into question what kind of screening methods have been used in all other defectors, and do we have some defectors that we use who really are double agents?

BURLOW: Leahy said the failure here comes on the heels of the loss of Edward Lee Howard, a former CIA agent fired by the agency and reportedly identified by Yurchenko as a Soviet spy. Howard escaped from the United States in September while under FBI surveillance.

Leahy said these incidents have shaken the confidence of a lot of Senators of both parties.

SENATOR LEAHY: You assume that the CIA in this business, trained professionals, know what they're doing. That assumption is now being questioned.

BURLOW: George Carver, a former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, thinks Yurchenko was a genuine defector who began having grave doubts about what he'd done. Carver described what he called "a kind of post-defection depression" as to similar to that in the break up of a marriage. He said he believe Yurchenko defected in one of those periods.

GEORGE CARVER: You wonder, literally, metaphorically, my God, why am I sleeping in this bed? What have I done? What have I given up? And you begin to want to do something that is very human to want to do but is impossible to do. You want to unring bells that you have rung and recross bridges that you have burned.

BURLOW: At this point, Carver speculates Yurchenko probably got into contact with or was contacted by Soviet agents who brought home to him the gravity of what he'd done and appealed to his patriotism but, more importantly, his commitment to his family and friends.

CARVER: The Soviets are quite capable of taking the line, look, your Uncle Danya was shot last week. Your Aunt Tatiana was shot early this week. Next week will be your cousin Sergei. After that will be your wife, and after that will be your son. If any Soviet threats of that kind were used they would have been highly creditable to a former KGB officer who

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would have known perfectly well that the Soviets meant what they said and were quite capable of carrying out precisely such threats.

BURLOW: Carver said when Yurchenko returns to Moscow he will probably be put on the Soviet equivalent of Phil Donahue and other talk shows where he'll repeat what he told reporters here in Washington yesterday, that he was drugged and kidnapped to the U.S. by the CIA.

CARVER: And then, after they have gotten all the mileage they can get -- it might take a week or two, or even a month or so, he will drop off the scene. I think he due course he will be tried or told that he has been tried in absentia. He'll be taken to a base. If he's lucky, he'll get a bullet in the base of his skull. And if he's less lucky, as for example was Benkovsky 20 years ago, his end will be considerably less swift and pleasant than that. Benkovsky was tossed alive into a crematorium as a warning to others who would think of betraying the Motherland, and Yurchenko may well wind up with a similar fate.

BURLOW: George Carver. I'm Alan Burlow, in Washington.

NOWA ADAMS: All of this, of course, sounds as if it could be the stuff of spy novels. Today, we thought we'd ask an expert about that.

David Wise is with us. He has written a spy novel called The Childrens' Game. He is a co-author of The Invisible Government, a book about the CIA, and also is intelligence analyst for Cable News Network.

Mr. Wise, there's quite a cliche involved here today. Stranger than fiction perhaps?

DAVID WISE: The Yurchenko case could have come out of a novel, of course, because a lot of novels are written about defectors, double agents, and what we're really talking about here what is truth? And, specifically, what is truth about a man who comes to you and says I want to come to your side, I want to turn my back on my family, my friends, my society?

ADAMS: What was your reaction when you heard this news? Did you say to yourself, perhaps, that this person was sent by the KGB to come to the country, to defect, to learn how we debriefed people, for example, and then to go back to Moscow? Did you think that?

WISE: My guess would be that he defected of his own free will, that he was not drugged and kidnapped, although he may well have been drugged subsequently. In the course of his questioning, for one reason or another, he changed his mind and perhaps there was some element of CIA bungling or excessive pressure applied to him. He was certainly isolated in a safe house as we know, and he may have felt terribly alone and decided that this had all looked awfully good in Rome on the 1st of August, but on the 2nd of November in Washington it didn't look so good.

ADAMS: Well, in that case, going back to Moscow, what sort of

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credibility is he going to have there? Does he have any sort of career left in the Soviet Union?

WISE: Well, my guess is he's chopped liver once he gets back there. And the next question you have to ask yourself is, well, he knows that, doesn't he? He must know it. He can't be deluding himself unless he's really unstable. Therefore, why do it?

Well, it's difficult here in Washington or in the United States to understand that the Russians, while many of them feel terribly oppressed by the political system, have a deep love of their country just as Americans do.

I was in the Soviet Union in May and I saw that once again among the people I talked to, and they're actually capable of separating out the political system from the Motherland, or the concept of Russia, and he may have, if he was not a plant, he may have felt -- it may have dawned on him as time went by that he would never eat black bread again and see the birch trees and see his family, and that may have been enough of a pull even knowing that he was taking a terrible risk.

ADAMS: Have we gone far enough afield into the world of fantasy here or is there something else we ought to be speculating about, some other sort of scenario?

WISE: Well, one other point that might be made is that a number of number of succession of high level CIA officials in the last day have told us that the CIA would never drug a defector. Well, I can't speak to their present practice, but it's a matter of record and there's sworn testimony before a House committee and Stansfield Turner has written in his recent memoirs that a very prominent defector in the 1960s was drugged on 17 separate occasions while being held in confinement for a period of three-and-a-half years by the CIA in an eight-foot square concrete cell. He was administered one or more of four drugs on these 17 occasions in order to presumably elicit facts from him that he might be unwilling to share with the CIA.

I think it's important to realize that when CIA officials say "we would never do a thing like this" that is perhaps they wish the world might be, but it's not so.

ADAMS: David Wise, of Cable News Network.

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